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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS JOLO ISLAND

REF: MANILA 001396

¶1. SUMMARY. The Ambassador's April 26 trip to Jolo successfully highlighted USG efforts -- ranging from JSOTF civil-military operations to USAID computer literacy and infrastructure projects -- to change the dynamic of this long-time Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah safe- haven and recruiting ground. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Warmly welcomed by Sulu Provincial Governor Benjamin Loong, other local civilian and military officials, and crowds of waving and smiling Sulu citizens of all ages, the Ambassador used her April 26 visit to Jolo Island in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to highlight USG initiatives aimed at helping the GRP win back this long-time Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) sanctuary and terrorist recruiting ground. Her first stop in Jolo City was to lay flowers at the bombed-out ruin of the Sulu Consumer Cooperative, which was destroyed by ASG terrorists in a March 27 bombing that left nine people dead and at least 20 more injured -- the majority of them Muslims.

¶3. In Maimbung town, Ambassador visited a high school built by Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and US troops during Balikatan-06 and equipped with 10 computers from U.S. AID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) Program. The Ambassador joined Governor Loong and the Maimbung mayor for a formal opening of a port facility renovated under U.S. AID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao Program (GEM). This almost one million dollar infrastructure project will significantly improve economic activities and transportation services between Maimbung and neighboring municipalities. The Ambassador also participated in a ground breaking ceremony for the Maimbung Area Community Center, which the AFP and Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines will construct in 2006. The site will serve as a future town hall and center for community information meetings; medical, occupational, and livelihood training programs; and social events, promoting civil society and a more open and transparent government that is in touch with its citizens.

¶4. During a live interview on the local radio station, the Ambassador highlighted U.S. support for peace and prosperity. Local and national media carried this message of cooperation and effective transformation for several days.

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Kenney